

**GOALS AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS
AMERICAN HERITAGE RIVER INITIATIVE
BIANNUAL MEETING
EL PASO, TEXAS**

November 3- 4, 2003 El Paso Convention Center

Purpose of the Meeting:

- *Characterize the Rio Grande History, Culture, Environment, And Economics*
- *Celebrate Rio Grande AHRI Achievements*
- *Identify Challenges And Opportunity in The Near Future (Phase 2) And Distant Future (Phase 3) For The Rio Grande AHRI*

- Introduce the activities of the Rio Grande AHRI Community Partners: Success Stories and Challenges
 - *What does AHRI mean to your community?*
 - *How has AHRI affected your community?*
 - What original Action plan goals and objectives, presented in the Rio Grande nomination for AHRI designation, have been accomplished?
 - *What should AHRI mean to your community?*
 - What else does your community want to accomplish with its AHRI
 - Designation, while it has River Navigator support (Phase 2) and beyond (Phase 3)
- The International Connection with the [Environmental Protection Agency US-Mexico Border Program: Border 2012 / EPA: OCEM - Good Neighbor Environmental Board \(GNEB\) Program / International Boundary and Water Commission \(IBWC\) /Commission ... / State of the Rio Grande and the Environment of the Border Region ... / EPA's American Heritage Rivers > AHRI Contacts](#)
- Connection with other Voluntary Stewardship Programs: [Preserve America: Explore and Enjoy Our Heritage / EPA Land Revitalization Initiative | Urban Rivers Restoration ... / Groundwork USA / Take Pride In America / Save America's Treasures](#), etc.
- Federal Workgroup - How can we better serve the communities to accomplish their objectives, with River Navigator support? If the river communities want a continued Federal role after the River Navigator support expires, what options would work best?
- Strategic Plan - Phase II - Next Steps
- Strategic Plan - Phase III - Future

**Strategic Plan Strawman
Phase I - Phase II
1998 - 2003**

Phase I - The Consortium of the Rio Grande (CoRio)

History of CoRio:

In response to the American Heritage Rivers Initiative, communities along the Rio Grande from El Paso to Brownsville joined together through an Inter-Jurisdictional Agreement to nominate the Texas portion of the Rio Grande as a Heritage River. Consortium, or CoRio, membership was drawn from 25 cities, 7 counties, and other organized local jurisdiction along the Rio Grande, whose elected leaders and/or governing bodies urged the rivers AHR designation. These jurisdictions serve over 2 million people. The Rio Grande nomination was spearheaded by 150-member Citizen Advisory Committee, which developed CoRio primary objectives.

Various local and regional non-profit organizations have also forwarded further the goals and objectives of CoRio, particularly in the areas of ecological restoration and heritage/eco-based tourism.

Much still remains to be accomplished to make the American Heritage River Initiative a greater success. The Consortium of the Rio Grande and the American Heritage Rivers Initiative has brought together communities 1250 miles apart in an effort to reconnect people with the Rio Grande and to appreciate its importance ecologically, historically, culturally and economically. Local officials have begun viewing the river as one entity B an entity that unites rather than separates these communities and two nations.

The mayors for the City of El Paso, City of Laredo and City of Brownsville led the leadership of CoRio. During the Fall of 2002 discussions with all three Mayor's determined continuing this river community group was not a direction that the Mayors believed was moving the American Heritage River's Initiative forward. The successes were not as evident as they had hoped from Co Rio. Therefore, the charter, which had expired, would not be renewed and reconstituting a river community group would begin. The selection of a new River Navigator, Adele Cardenas de Malott, by EPA would provide a new palette for expanding and educating community partners about the American Heritage River Initiative on the Rio Grande.

The foundation of the initiative is that river communities define how the Federal government can assist them to achieve their visions for a sustainable future. The goals and objectives of the initiative will be achieved with focused assistance from our Federal partners, initially with River Navigator support, and with greater priorities given to community-based efforts to restore our Nation's river. The Executive Order setting up the AHRI calls for indicators of success so that progress in meeting goals and objectives can be assessed. The local river communities and the Federal agencies assisting them should be recognized and rewarded when they have succeeded in building productive partnerships.

Through the leadership of Congressman Sylvester Reyes's office, the Congressman has provided a platform for all the federal agencies invested on the Rio Grande to meet on a bi-annual basis to discuss on-going and future activities throughout the entire Rio Grande watershed. This federal workgroup provides an opportunity for federal partnership to occur in communities that may not have activities or projects happening and/or allows federal partners to contribute where leveraging of funds is afforded. All the agencies have mission's statements for the Rio Grande and all include: community partnership, [assistance where applicable with program ties, restoration and maintenance of River frontage for all parties who maintain ownership of the river frontage property.

In 1999 a Memorandum of Agreement was signed with 15 Federal Agencies to do the following actions:

- Coordinate programs to assist CoRio
- Coordinate with CoRio all agency projects associated with AHR
- Identify agency programs offering assistance in river conservation and community health and revitalization
- Refocus programs and provide support for communities covered by the AHR designation
- Provide support for CoRio's Action Plan

Co-Rio Objectives:

- Assess local Water Needs into the 21st Century
- Support Local Vocabulary River Initiatives
- Preserve and restore historic sites and structures associated with life on the Rio Grande
- Conserve, protect and improve the quality and quantity of waters of the Rio Grande
- Celebrate the music and literature of the Rio Grande
- Contribute to economic growth and diversification;
- Develop new opportunities for eco-tourism and river-based recreational facilities.
- Participate Meaningfully in Regional Programs Involving the River
- Have Bilateral Issues Addressed with Due Diligence
- Protect Our Heritage of Freedom
- Broaden the Base of Support for the River

In the Fall of 2002, the past and new River Navigator discussed with the leadership of CoRio reconstituting the group, and it was determined that the charter not be renewed and a new outlook for river community coordination and involvement be established. A concern of the past leadership was the lack of concrete success stories through the American Heritage River program linking CoRio directly. Since last fall, establishing communication with past and potential new river community partners has been in progress, and the re-direction of how AHRI can partner with communities and community groups is now in process. The Rio Grande AHRI role as host of the 2003 Fall Bi-National Meeting provides an avenue to reconnect with those Texas and Mexico communities unaware of the AHRI program and to also recognize any new or on-going activities along the Rio Grande. This River like most rivers has a great and long history of providing for the people along the river.

Phase 2 - Focus on achieving results, based on updated action plan, with remaining years of River Navigator support

As originally designed, the AHRI includes a commitment for a federally funded River Navigator to provide assistance to the designated river communities for five years. In March 2003, the national AHRI Interagency Committee agreed to extend River Navigator support beyond five years for a number of river communities. The Rio Grande's River Navigator was extended for an extra year, through September 2005, to provide more time for the Rio Grande communities to become self-sufficient in accessing the wide variety of Federal programs and funding available to address their needs. Now is a critical time for Rio Grande community partners to define how best to take advantage of the remaining years of River Navigator support (Phase 2), by reviewing the original action plan for specific measures of success, identifying accomplishments, and redefining what can be accomplished in the next two years. Once the River Navigator's formal tenure expires, the Rio Grande still continues to be an AHRI. The AHRI designation of the Rio Grande is permanent. It is up to the river communities to define how to make use of the designation in the future (Phase 3). In particular, they should consider whether they want a continued Federal role beyond September 2005, and if so, how much (active partnership or occasional consultation), and what mechanisms could be used to maintain Federal involvement (e.g., continued Federal Workgroup, career agency staff serving as champions for community needs, etc.).

One potential opportunity for the Rio Grande AHRI is an on-going discussion of extending the Rio Grande AHRI designation to include the New Mexico portion of the Rio Grande watershed as originally intended. Support would be required from river communities, Tribes, local governments, the State of New Mexico, and members of Congress. A goal of the Bi-national meeting would be to provide a forum for New Mexico river partners to discuss their relative interest in this opportunity. This would be a significant addition to Phase II of our Strategic plan, greatly expanding the geographic scope of the Rio Grande's AHRI designation.

Another potential opportunity for the Rio Grande is to link its AHRI efforts to some of the other Federally coordinated community-based initiatives. The First Lady announced the Preserve America initiative in March, designed to provide economic development through heritage and nature tourism. Its three lead Federal agencies are all AHRI Federal partners, and Texans direct two of them. An additional new program is focusing on improving the Federal response to drought issues in the West is Interior's Water 2025 Initiative. This effort could be linked to the border water policy already underway on the Rio Grande. These are just some of the possible collaborative opportunities for AHRI.

Preliminary discussions with all stakeholders on the Rio Grande need to begin and the fall meeting offers a venue for a dialogue among past and future partners.